



Resilience

The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community.

It's that time of year when I watch for the first delicate crocuses to break through the hardened crust of the March ground. Yellow, purple, and white, their short blooms open like small cups of sunlight. But by night, the delicate blossoms close up, waiting until dawn coaxes them to yawn agape again. Their daily opening and closing reminds me that so much growth happens not in straight-line arrows stretching onward and upward as diagonals of progress cutting across a chart, but rather in rhythmic expansion and contraction more akin to breathing.

Resilience — the capacity to recover quickly from challenges, setbacks, or trauma — is a much touted quality that is only present when straight-line progress is interrupted by pauses or downturns. In the scientific definition, resilience refers more literally to elasticity and the ability to bounce back or return to the shape or trajectory something had before being stressed, compressed, or deterred. As a human capacity, it also depends on flexibility; but very often it does not return us to our original "shape." Rather, human resilience often stretches us into different "shapes" as we grow into new capacities, understandings, or relationships — new ways of being that respond to the barriers we encounter or the trauma we have experienced while still being true to who we are.

When flowers open and close in circadian rhythms, their expansion and contraction is caused by the outer leaves or petals growing faster than the inner ones in darkness and cool temperatures. Then, in the warmth of daylight, the inner petals grow too, pushing the blossom open.

Might we learn from this, a rhythm for our own human resilience, individually

and collectively? As we experience the setbacks of our challenging times or the natural ebb and flow of life, can we step out of our urgent quest for outward action and progress long enough to turn inward, to nurture our spiritual growth, which in turn, will spur us to new outward growth and action? Can we resist the dominant culture's addiction to continuous growth — the onward and upward trap of 20th-century notions of progress — and allow ourselves, our systems and our organizations time to rest, to reflect, sometimes even to contract, learning who we are and what we need before asking what it is we are to do and how and where and when?

Author Andrew Zolli says resilient systems "move at more than one speed." He notes that they must demonstrate both "the agility that comes with short-term thinking and wisdom that comes from long-term thinking." Which is another rhythm, this one fluctuating between an immediate response to urgent needs, and a slower, thoughtful reflection on options, consequences, and the long game. It is a rhythm found in healthy religious communities, moving at more than one speed at the same time, rooted in tradition while responding to the suffering of the present day and working toward a better future.

We hear this in the statement, "The arc of the moral universes is long but it bends toward justice," voiced by Martin Luther King, Jr., paraphrasing a 1853 sermon by abolitionist and Unitarian minister Theodore Parker. King and Parker both practiced the rhythms of moving at more than one speed. As Parker said originally, "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but a little ways. I cannot calculate the curve

and complete the figure by experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice."

We may not see the full arc of history to know exactly how or when today's injustices and suffering will be addressed. But being rooted in faith traditions and teachings committed to justice across the millennia, our conscience is awakened — one might say *stretched* into the shape of new understandings, new capacities, new relationships. And as we experience the adversity, setbacks, and inevitable heartbreak of working to end oppression, we find resilience in the rhythms of breathing in and breathing out, opening and closing, resting and acting, drawing inward and reaching out. Resilience, in this sense, connects past and future in an arc bent and continually rebounding toward justice, through our dreams and actions, our faith and work, our imagination and daily practice.

With this ebb and flow, we grow. We stretch into new ways of being that can adapt to the dramatic loss and change and stresses that are all hallmarks of the 21st century. So it is that we discover resilience as the rhythmic movement of our human blooming.

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Resilience Theme Resources

Resources for further reflection are in this month's Chalice Circle packet at www.unityunitarian.org/chalice-circles.html and in the brochure racks at church.